

TRANSITION TO CHANGE

BY ROBERT JONES | THE VILLAGE FAMILY SERVICE CENTER



Many times in life, we talk about transitions. We may transition from high school to college, and then from college to the workforce. Maybe the transition is from being single to married or transitioning into parenthood. We are seeing a significant transition in the workplace as baby boomers reach retirement age at the rate of 10,000 a day and are being replaced with millennials.

Each of these scenarios may be described as a transition, but really, they're changes. People tend to fear change, because we

develop a level of comfort that gives us peace. I think that's why we use the word "transition." But instead of softening the idea of change, let's talk about it straight on, starting with the three realities of change.

REALITY NO. 1: WE ARE IN A WORLD OF CONSTANT CHANGE

People say that students in college right now are preparing for jobs and industries that have not been created yet.

I often think of what has changed since I was in college. If you want to see how considerably the world has changed, consider the Beloit College Mindset List. This year's college freshmen have grown up in a largely floppy disk-less world; they have only known Justin Timberlake as a solo act; and in their lifetime, the blackberry has gone from being a fruit to a communication device and back to a fruit.

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REALITY NO. 2: CHANGE IS ONE CONSTANT ACROSS ALL JOBS AND AREAS.

When I talk about change, I always reference Blockbuster. It seems like just a few years ago it was common to venture to a Blockbuster or another video store and stroll the aisles looking for the latest in movies. I never would have thought that would change, but then here came Netflix and their innovative idea to mail, and then stream, movies. Blockbuster missed that change and now they are no longer.

REALITY NO. 3: OUR FUNDAMENTAL TASK IN LIFE IS TO LEARN HOW TO HANDLE CHANGE.

This is where society gets hung up, because we don't always see change as a positive thing. A significant reason that we are challenged by change is that we have become comfortable with what we have learned to expect. When there's change in the workplace, we start to ask questions like, "How is this going to affect me?" When this is the situation, we resist the change, which will inevitably create struggles and affect morale.

SO HOW DO WE NAVIGATE CHANGE?

We must first recognize that any change or transition is a process that is going to vary from person to person. The acceptance of change is going to take different people different amounts of time, and we cannot take shortcuts.

William Bridges writes in "Managing Transitions" that this process begins with the **Ending Stage**, which is the recognition that change is happening. This stage is going to be met with a wide range of emotions, such as fear, anger, denial, and a sense of loss. As a leader of a group coming to grips with the Ending Stage, we must accept that people are going to experience all these different emotions. They are going to resist the change, and the only thing you can do is listen and communicate. You can't rush this process. As a leader, you probably have had time to process the change. Your subordinates are also going to need time to process the change.

Bridges describes the second stage as the **Neutral Zone**, where people are going to start to feel a sense of confusion and impatience with the changes. This is going to affect morale and productivity, because as humans, when we are in a stressful situation and struggling with change, the natural reaction is to fall back to the old ways. To navigate the struggles of the Neutral Zone, keep people focused on team goals and encourage them to talk through the change. To aid in the process, establish and celebrate short-term goals that will allow your team to see the purpose of the change and begin the process of



creating buy-in.

The last stage is the **New Beginnings** stage, which is going to bring about higher levels of energy and an openness to learning. Most importantly, this is when people become comfortable with the change. When this stage is achieved, people can see the bigger picture and connect to the new mission and purpose of the organization.

To achieve this, the change must be approached holistically. This means that the people instituting the change or transition must address five key components:

- Vision
- Skills
- Incentives
- Resources
- Action Plan

If leadership does not incorporate all of these into the process, they will be met with struggles. For example, a plan without a vision will only bring about confusion; a plan without incentives will bring about resistance; a plan without the necessary resources will bring about

a sense of frustration.

I've addressed change from the perspective of the leadership, but I think it is important to recognize that change and transition is a two-way street. The frontline staff, along with leadership, needs to be open to listening to all people affected by the potential change and should play a role in the change process. To accomplish this, the frontline staff needs have an open mind and recognize that "how it used to be" is different from "this is the best way." Organizations need to stop thinking in terms of "no" and approaching a new idea with the desire to stifle change. Instead, we need to think in the terms of "yes" and look for the opportunity in every idea.

Change is a struggle, and most people fight it. But we can't continue to fight change, because that's how organizations end up like Blockbuster. Change can often follow the same path as grief, where people will face denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The only way to navigate this process is to allow for open and honest communication from all of those involved and, of course, time to process and grieve the past in order to welcome the change.



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leadership, and employee engagement. Robert has a bachelor's degree in history and a master's degree in education with an emphasis in counseling and leadership from Northern State University in Aberdeen, SD. He also has a bachelor's degree in communication studies from Minnesota State University Moorhead, and is a doctoral candidate for the Educational Doctorate in Leadership from St. Mary's University of Minnesota. He has been an adjunct faculty member for the University of Jamestown Master of Arts in Leadership program.

In his free time, Robert volunteers with local organizations like the Rape and Abuse Crisis Center and is an alumni advisor for a fraternity at Minnesota State University Moorhead.

HOW ADAPTABILITY CAN HELP YOU BE AN EFFECTIVE LEADER

Like it or not, leaders all over the world are facing change and complexity – new cultures, new jobs, new markets, new everything. Because change is constant and inevitable, leaders must adapt to succeed.

Center for Creative Leadership research confirms this imperative to adapt. According to our research, the most frequently cited success factor for North American managers was the ability to develop or adapt. Successful executives in North America and Europe:

- **Adapt** to the changing external pressures facing the organization.
- **Adjust** their management style to changing situations.
- **Accept** changes as positive.
- **Revise** plans as necessary.
- **Consider** other people's concerns during change.

Conversely, the inability to develop or adapt was the most frequently cited reason for career derailment among North American managers.

That's because inflexible leaders limit the adaptability of others. New initiatives may be halted or stifled. Resistance to change may undermine critical projects or system-wide implementation. Employee enthusiasm, cooperation, morale, and creativity are jeopardized, making it all the more difficult to run the business or organization.



ADAPTING TO CHANGE REQUIRES FLEXIBILITY

Adaptability is about having ready access to a range of behaviors that enable leaders to shift and experiment as things change. According to CCL's Allan Calarco, co-author of "Adaptability: Responding Effectively to Change," "to survive change in your organization or industry or profession, you must first lead yourself through the process of transition. This includes finding ways to help yourself feel more grounded, understanding the impact that change is having on

you, and understanding the impact of your behavior on others."

Calarco says adaptable people show 3 kinds of adaptability:

1. Cognitive flexibility: The ability to use different thinking strategies and mental frameworks.

Leaders who have cognitive flexibility are able to incorporate different thinking strategies and mental frameworks into their planning, decision-making, and management of day-to-day work. They can simultaneously hold multiple scenarios in mind and can see when to shift and inject a

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HOW TO ADAPT TO CHANGE: 5 TIPS

As a leader, you not only have to respond to change, but you also have to steer change. Use these 5 tips as you adapt to change and guide your team through change:

- **Be curious.** Ask lots of questions. Wonder, explore, and consider before you judge and decide.
- **Don't get too attached to a single plan or strategy.** Have Plan B (and C) at the ready.
- **Create support systems.** Don't go it alone. Look to mentors, friends, coaches, trusted peers, professional colleagues, family members, and others to serve as your support system in times of change. Encourage employees to do the same.
- **Understand your own reaction to change.** You have to be clear about your own emotions and thoughts about changes, so you can be straightforward with others.
- **Immerse yourself in new environments and situations.** Do this when you are confronted by change – but get practice by joining activities, meeting new people, and trying new things on a regular basis.

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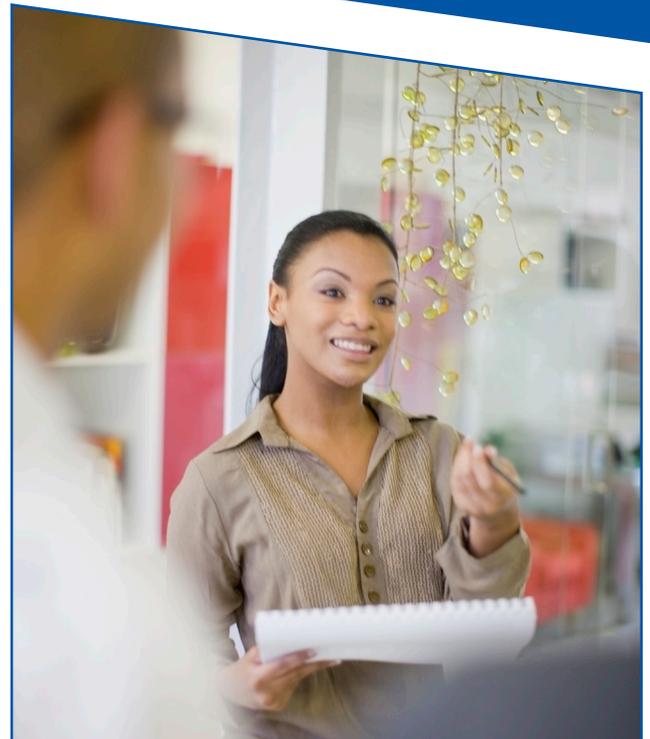
change. Cognitive flexibility indicates nimble, divergent thinking, an interest in developing new approaches, the ability to see and leverage new connections, and the propensity to work well across the organization. These leaders readily learn from experience and recognize when old approaches don't work.

2. Emotional flexibility: The ability to vary one's approach to dealing with emotions and those of others.

Leaders with emotional flexibility vary their approach to dealing with their own and others' emotions – an area that many leaders often fail to consider. An emotionally flexible leader is comfortable with the process of transition, including grieving, complaining, and resistance. Adapting to change requires give and take between the leader and those experiencing the change. A leader without emotional flexibility is dismissive of others' concerns and emotions and shuts down discussion. At the same time, an emotionally adaptive leader moves the change or agenda forward.

3. Dispositional flexibility: The ability to remain optimistic and, at the same time, realistic.

Leaders who display dispositional flexibility (or personality-related flexibility) operate from a place of optimism grounded in realism and openness. They will acknowledge a bad situation but simultaneously visualize a better future. They are neither blindly positive nor pessimistic and defeatist. Ambiguity is well-tolerated.



Dispositionally flexible leaders see change as an opportunity rather than as a threat or danger.

By learning and practicing behaviors that boost your cognitive, emotional, and dispositional flexibility, you can become more adaptable and, in turn, help others to adapt.

This article originally appeared in the publication "Adaptability: Responding Effectively to Change." It is reprinted here with permission from Center for Creative Leadership (www.ccl.org)